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# Harris County OKs \$17M to add polls, voting hours and drive-thru balloting for November election

Zach Despart | Aug. 25, 2020 | Updated: Aug. 26, 2020 1:13 p.m.



Allison Aungier, an election clerk, left, works behind a plastic barrier at her desk wearing a face mask, face shield and gloves as she checks in voters at the Metropolitan Multi-Service Center, 1475 West Gray, Friday, July 10, 2020, in Houston.

Photo: Melissa Phillip, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Harris County voters this November will have more time and more than a hundred additional places to cast ballots in the presidential election, including drive-through locations and one day of 24-hour voting, under an expansive plan approved by Commissioners Court Tuesday.

With the additional polling locations, an extra week of early voting and up to 12,000 election workers, Harris County Clerk Chris Hollins is pledging a smooth

November election.

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election plan. The money is on top of the \$12 million the court approved earlier this year to expand mail-in voting amid fears that in-person balloting could spread the coronavirus during the ongoing pandemic.

The clerk's plan includes extended early balloting hours, including multiple nights to 10 p.m. and one 24-hour voting session, drive-through options, as well as new equipment to process an expected record number of mail ballots.

"The County Clerk's office has made it our top priority to ensure a safe, secure, accessible, fair and efficient election for the voters of Harris County this November," Hollins told court members. "And to ensure this outcome, our office has ... executed a robust set of 24 initiatives, many of which were piloted in the July primary runoff election."

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Hollins' plan is among the boldest unveiled by a Texas elections administrator to improve a voter's experience and increase turnout in a state with historically low participation, said University of Houston political science Professor Brandon Rottinghaus.

"These changes would rocket Harris County to the top of the list as the most progressive approach to voting," Rottinghaus said.

Rice University political science professor Mark Jones said the plan could inadvertently undermine a push by Democrats to expand mail voting for voters under 65 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Hollins is making sure that voting in person is safer than going to the grocery store," Jones said. "To the extent to which other county clerks follow his lead, it's more and more difficult to make the case that voting in person represents a risk to someone's health."

In previous elections, Harris County operated about 40 early voting and 750 Election Day sites. The additional funding, Hollins said, will allow the county to operate 120 early voting and 808 Election Day locations.

He estimated 1.7 million voters may turn out, a record in any Harris County election and an increase of 361,000 since the 2016 presidential contest.

A spokeswoman for Hollins did not respond to a request for the total estimated cost of the 2020 election.

The Democratic majority on Commissioners Court approved the new funding on a party line vote, with the two Republican members opposed. Precinct 4 Commissioner Jack Cagle noted the county clerk plans to spend far more money on this election than in past presidential years, including \$3.2 million in 2012 and \$4.1 million in 2016.

Precinct 3 Commissioner Steve Radack pointed out that the heavily Democratic Precinct 1 is slated to host at least 20 percent more Election Day voting locations than other precincts.

"I find these numbers to be disturbing to be weighted the way it is," Radack said.

Lillie Schecter, the Harris County Democratic Party chairwoman, praised the clerk's office for making voting "as accessible as possible."

Harris County Republican Party Chairman Keith Nielsen said the CARES Act funding would have been better spent on direct aid to businesses and residents harmed by the pandemic. He also said it was unwise for Hollins, an inexperienced clerk, to try to implement so many new initiatives in such an important election.

"In the midst of all that we have to cope with, it just seems like we're making a worse situation, as far as what voters understand and how they understand where to go vote," Nielsen said.

Hollins said his office clustered voting sites near where residents work and attend school, placing a disproportionate number inside Precinct 1, which includes much of the city of Houston. Since last year, county residents have been able to vote at any location, rather than their assigned precinct, former county clerk Diane

Trautman's signature initiative.

County clerks of both political parties have struggled to run hiccup-free elections, owing to Harris County's size and status as the third-most populous in the United States.

This fall brings additional challenges, namely the COVID-19 pandemic that has upended daily life and required people to avoid unnecessary contact with others.

Texans also no longer have the option to vote straight tickets, which the Legislature abolished after the 2018 general election. Seventy-six percent of Harris County voters punched a straight ticket that year, a far quicker method than individually choosing a candidate in each race.

This change, along with the need to enforce social distancing at polling sites, could cause long lines without a significant increase in locations to cast ballots, Hollins said.

Securing funding for polling locations and staff is one obstacle; finding sites to host them is another. Hollins said the county caught a break when Houston Independent School District decided to hold classes virtually, allowing the clerk's office to reserve classrooms and gymnasiums.

"If all districts that touch Harris County are able to do that, we'd have much better access... for voting on Election Day," Hollins said.

The clerk's office plans to open a massive voting center at NRG Arena, and also will move its vote-counting headquarters there. Hollins said the Toyota Center also has volunteered its cavernous facility for voting, a well-known location he hoped would prove popular.

Hollins, who was appointed to the job in May, has never run an election of this size, though he successfully administered the low-turnout July primary runoff. He is keen to avoid the blunders of his predecessors, including delayed results during last year's mayoral election and hourslong voting lines in the March primaries.

This year's presidential election is the last contest that will be the responsibility of the Harris County clerk. Commissioners Court last month created an independent elections administration office to take over the role, a move most major Texas counties have already made.

The first day of early voting is Oct. 13.

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